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THE DRAMA AND THE PLAY

BY ARTHUR COLTON

It is no great hardship to differ from most men. It may even be a gratification. The minority which includes Maurice Maeterlinck, Charles Lamb (*vide* "On the tragedies of Shakespeare considered with reference to their fitness for stage representation") and Dr. Johnson ("Many of Shakespeare's plays are the worse for being acted: 'Macbeth,' for instance") is a comfortable minority, holding the oppressed but fruitful faith that "poems die" when it is endeavored to make visible in the flesh what was conceived for the imagining eye of the mind.

"For is it not evident," M. Maeterlinck continues, "that the Macbeth or Hamlet whom we see on the stage does not resemble the Macbeth or Hamlet of the book; that he has visibly fallen in sublimity? Representation of a poem contradicts it. It drives the swans from the great lake and casts back the pearls into the deep. Lear, Hamlet, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra cannot be represented, and it is dangerous to see them on the stage. Something of Hamlet is dead for us from the day when we have seen him die before our eyes. The spectre of an actor has dethroned him and we cannot put the usurper out of our dreams. I remember this death of Hamlet from my dreams. One evening I opened the door to the usurper. The actor was famous. He entered. A single one of his looks showed me he was not Hamlet. For three hours I watched him occupy himself with that lie."

It is not that Shakespeare's skill as a playwright under the conditions of his time need be debated, unless Mr. Bernard Shaw chooses to do so, who, being neither a sound playwright nor a sound critic, is yet a "chartered libertine" of whom nothing more specific need be asked to insure all men's satisfaction than that, like the man of "Man and Superman," he "go on talking."**

* Mr. Gilbert Chesterton has given a substantial reason, however, for a faith in Mr. Shaw's soundness: "Most people," Mr. Chesterton announces, "think they would agree with Bernard Shaw if they could understand him; I am the only one who understands Bernard Shaw, and

But there is no proof of Shakespeare's pre-eminence as a playwright under the conditions of his time. The theatrical world then, and for a generation or more after, did not think him pre-eminent; it divided its admiration between Shakespeare, Johnson and Fletcher. It is in literature, as a dramatist poet, and to the contemplation of ten generations of readers and their slowly accumulating comprehension of him, that he so overtops and diminishes other men. The greater part of him, and nearly all the wonder of him, is not actable and has never been acted. His pre-eminent place on the stage is the shadow and reflex of his status in literature. Only those who have never read and studied "Hamlet," or have done so to small inward result, now get only a fraction of "Hamlet." If an absolute "first-nighter," with a mind as unlettered as Partridge's toward Elizabethan drama, and yet a practised critic of new plays, is conceivable, and could be found, and various Elizabethan plays could be given and tested upon him, would he find the Shakespearian plays distinctly the best? I cannot help thinking that he would. Like the seventeenth-century playgoers, he might call Johnson a careful workman, and admire Fletcher's cleverness, and remark that Shakespeare, with all his carelessness, obscurities, subtleties that for stage results were worse than useless, occasional loose plots and hugger-mugger ending, nevertheless had a sort of Oh-by-the-way! knack of hitting close to the centre, which showed that he was of the "profession" and could "spot" stage values if he chose, and showed that to have been an actor was a better training for a playwright than a college education. Something of this kind was intended by the seventeenth-century critics, though they probably were clearer in mind as to what they meant by Johnson's "art" and Fletcher's "wit" than as to what they meant by Shake-

I disagree with him": . . . a substantial reason inasmuch as most people have underlying intuitions more solid than they have intelligence to explain; whereas Mr. Chesterton's intelligence is a dividing sword, but his fundamentals seem accidental, laid in the opportunities of controversy; even so that he manages to give his religious conservatism the air of a personally invented eccentricity. If, then, the popular faith leans to Mr. Shaw and Mr. Chesterton understands him, but most people do not understand Mr. Shaw, and Mr. Chesterton does, it would seem to follow that Mr. Shaw is a sensible but difficult writer. But it is possible that Mr. Chesterton understands Mr. Shaw better than he does "most people," and that "most people" in point of fact think they would disagree with Mr. Shaw if they knew how to do it.

speare's gifts of "nature," and were in part mistaken in what they thought it was, this "nature," which certainly was in part an actor-manager's better-trained sense of stage values.

But with the student and lifelong lingerer over Shakespeare, his impressions of Shakespeare on the stage are never purely theatrical. He has read them full of literature. To him, in the comments of the purely theatrical critic just imagined as uncorrupted of literature, there would seem to be astonishing omissions. To him the objection to seeing "Hamlet," "Macbeth" or "Lear" is where Lamb and Maeterlinck have placed it, namely, in that no actor can compete with—he can only outrage—the image and incorporeal vision already throned and regnant. If this image is weak, vague and half forgotten, an extraordinary actor may drive it out by sheer power and replace it by himself for the time being; which singular but successful assault was more than once committed on me by Edwin Booth. For the rest, having suffered much and often from the practice of a now-discarded theory, that one ought to enjoy seeing Shakespeare acted, and whether he keeps the stage or not has to me only the interest of a regret to know that good actors still waste themselves after that vanity, that to some extent it is under his wide ægis that men still talk of the "literary drama" in such terms that I know not what they mean, and darken the stage with plays in blank verse, and go their ways unrepentant, unappalled, guileless amid their iniquities.

If by a "drama" we always meant something to be read, and by a "play" always something to be presented and performed, with our terms so divided we might venture hopefully on the not very adventurous statement that no one ever "wrote a play." Men have written speeches, dialogues, stage directions, and so on, indicating the intended schemes, made these contributions to the eventual total of a play; but the play did not exist until it was played; or it might be said to exist beforehand partially in imagination, in reality only while it was being performed and only in memory afterward; even as a symphony does not exist, it is not alive, in the silent symbols of its score, but only while the air is thrilled with its passion or its peace.

The confusion is historic. It arises from the use of old formulas for changed conditions. Our discussion of verse

is vitiated by our terminology, which bears the mould of vanished conditions. A lyric to a Greek was a song, but a lyric to us is not a song, though we talk in our amiably muddled way as if it were. Most of the "Songs and Lyrics" in Palgrave's "Golden Treasury" have never been set to music, never should be and never will be. No verse form is more unfit for actual singing than a sonnet. It is a "moment's monument," but it is as monumental as it is momentary, massive in petto, as structural as it is fluid, a thing to be not only taken runningly, but inspected with the mind's eye, like a carved gem or an etching. We all have an instinctive knowledge of what a lyric in literature really is, though few of us have so sure an instinct as Palgrave had, but our terminology does not tell what we know. It implies that a lyric has old association with song, which is true, but only passes the edges of an obscure subject. When the art of expression by means of words was wholly oral, there being no letters, there was no literature. Even what we call "Greek literature" was not literature to most of the Greeks, for they did not read it. They heard it, chaunted, declaimed, recited, by bard, orator and actor. They listened and looked and called it "musica." Writing was mainly for record and preservation, or for the use of the reciter, much as a musical score to-day is for record and the use of the performer. Every art implied a visual object or a visual and audible performance. But literature to-day does not imply a visual and audible performance. It means expression, not by the voice, but by conventional symbols of the alphabet, in combinations which convey directly that which they symbolize, and not by translation through imagined sound.

Every art has its own conditions, and these conditions determine its right practice. The conditions of creative literary art are to-day a printed page and two imagining minds. The physical sense through which it finds passage is the eye. It always carries with it associations of sound, but it is not necessarily, nor usually, translated through an imagined sound; the printed word is the direct and immediate conveyer of the thought for which it stands. Further, literature is a stationary art to the extent that it will stand still to be considered, examined and reviewed at any point and for any length of time, and in that respect and to

that extent resembles painting or architecture. The printed drama is a form of creative literature and is so governed. On the other hand, the stage play is an art in which many imaginations are involved, of writers, hearers, actors and those who plan, produce and arrange the setting. The physical senses through which it finds passage are both eye and ear. The words are spoken, and all that which from the stage goes through the eye in literature does not exist except as imaginative inferences. Finally the playwright's is an art in uninterrupted motion, and in this respect resembles not painting or literature, but music.

The phrase "literary drama" either means a drama to be read; or the adjective implies the commendatory addition that the piece has literary value as being well written; or, if applied to a stage play, it is either a phrase misused, or it has the derogatory meaning of a drama put to a use for which it is unfit; or, finally, it involves the opinion that two birds may be killed with one stone. In the derogatory sense, if a playwright says of a play (which he has not composed), "It is literary," it is as when a painter says of a painting (by some one else), "It is literary," and they both mean what a carpenter means, who (with a more adequate terminology, in more honest language, but less fit to print) criticises an apprentice for putting on shingles with cement, basing his criticism on the proposition that carpenters and masons practise two distinct arts.

Professor Matthews has lately called attention to Brunetière's "Law of the Drama," namely, that a dramatic subject is and must be human will in action. The struggle of a will against fate is tragedy, against social convention is melodrama. In tragedy sympathy goes out to a hero predestined to failure, in melodrama to a hero with the chances against him. Two equalized oppositions, or two wills against each other, compose comedy, and a will against an absurdity of custom is farce. The drama is distinguished from the novel by this law, inasmuch as the hero of a drama must be a force in himself while the hero of a novel may be a puppet of circumstance and the novel still be an effective story. The moving force in a novel may be the flow of events, its action the sequence and trend of incident, but action in the drama, according to Brunetière's "Law," is the assertion of a will.

Is it, then, so unapparent that the vital distinction lies

between the book and the stage, not between the novel and the drama which we read? Or why is it that so frequently one is at a loss to know what Brunetière and Professor Matthews mean by the "drama"? A drama in literature is a story told indirectly in dialogue, which may be assisted by voluminous prefaces, as is the practice of Mr. Bernard Shaw, or interspersed with narrative, as in George Eliot's "Spanish Gypsy." It may grade into and be variously touched with narrative. A novel is a story told partly in narrative, partly in dialogue; it may be mainly conversation or mainly direct narrative; it may be interesting through its plot and incidents alone, though it probably would be more interesting if its characters were not puppets, but determining factors. Literature is catholic. A book may be interesting for any one of many reasons. It is true that a man's will against fate is more profoundly tragic than man's will against a social convention or another man's will, but this applies also to the *motifs* of a novel.

The tragedy of Antigone is the conflict between Antigone and a social convention; she is crushed between the two conventions, the duty of obedience to the king and the duty of reverently burying one's dead brethren. The tragedy of "Medea" is the conflict of the two wills of the fiery Medea and the cold-blooded Jason; or the two wills, which are the expression of two innate temperaments, may be taken to involve something of the hopelessness and doom of a conflict with destiny; or, if Mr. Gilbert Murray's comment on the case—that no marriage was possible between a Greek and a barbarian—is as correct as it is interesting, then "Medea" is, in a sense, a tragedy of the "color line," which may be interpreted, according to one's philosophy of the subject, as a conflict with destiny or with convention.

Brunetière's "law," then, is not a law to the extent that it will stand minute application, or division and subdivision, but it is a law to the extent that it points to a difference,—inherent and important, although only one out of many differences,—between the demands, persuasions and forbiddances of fiction represented on the stage, and fiction read in a book. Otherwise understood, would it not seem amazing that critics should attempt to dig profound trenches between two methods in literature of telling a story, which methods easily borrow from and blend with one another, and in the same breath talk of the "literary drama" as if

there were nothing noticeable between two sets of conditions respectively created when a book is opened and a curtain raised, between two arts so fundamentally apart as fiction in the silent symbols of print, and fiction enacted?

The so-called "laws" of any art are never statute law, but always common law; not the edicts of authority, but the essence of cases. They are significant statements of the methods found best for getting the desired results out of the given conditions. The danger of calling them "laws" is the temptation to forget that they are laws only for the conditions which created them, the temptation to lightly raise "canons" out of the incidents of custom.

Brunetière's "law," perhaps, amounts to no more than this: that human will as the moving force is demanded by fiction on the stage more imperatively than by fiction in literature, both because the visible and audible persons of the actors keep the imagination fixed in humanity, and because the greater condensation of a play asks more insistently for the choice of means by which the attention and sympathy can be seized with the most immediate force. A contest of two wills is not necessarily comedy, it may be bitterly serious; nor of a will with a social convention necessarily melodrama, it may be wholly amusing; but it does seem to be true in novel, or drama, or play, or wheresoever, not only that the note grows deeper as the struggle grows more hopeless, but that when the single human will is seen pitted against some overtopping power, some law of life, some massed and moving concourse of events, there enters what we may, if we choose, call the "tragic note," and we may, if we choose, mark the "tragic note" as that unmistakable bell tone which the soul gives forth whenever it is struck by the realization and answers to the reminder of its own essential loneliness in the night against which it lifts its little lamp of courage. "Our hands are little, but our hearts are great," and the long lapse of the tide drags seaward. Whenever this underlying basis of human melancholy is touched and gives back that low sonorous echo, we may recognize a distinct phenomenon and call it the "tragic note"; and if we resolve that we will mean that phenomenon by the phrase, and mean nothing else, we shall have added one more jewel to the priceless treasury of an accurate terminology, to which we may have already contributed in the resolution to say "drama" when we talk of a book, and

“play” when we talk of the stage; we shall have drawn nearer to the psychology of Aristotle’s definition of tragedy as “an action great, grave and complete.”

Every art has its own conventions, or assumptions, thought to be useful or necessary, and these conventions vary greatly from age to age and from people to people. The chorus and the soliloquy were stage conventions, which, when in general use, were acceptable; but the chorus, being long disused, is no longer a convention, hence is no longer acceptable, hence the introduction of it in a play would be bad art; and the soliloquy and “aside” are so generally discarded and hence are become so unfamiliar, as to be nearly as unacceptable. On the other hand, it is a convention now that two hours and the same stage may stand and are acceptable for any number of separated times and places. But this has not always been an accepted convention.

The rule of the unity of action is a principle rather than a convention. It is as near to a canon or natural law as such things can come; like the law of gravitation, it is always there, but constantly being modified in application. Some such rule, principle or phenomenon is found in all the arts, governing them in some degree, the principle of economy of attention, or that things can be better comprehended and held when their details are classified, made coherent, given some structural unity and organized relations. The scientist, in a sense, practises an art, and there is an art of science not only because he advances by successive hypotheses, which are acts of creative imagination, but because he classifies the facts which he has accumulated and makes them structural and coherent.

The unities of time and place were neither principles nor conventions, but the refusal of certain conventions, and a demand for a nearer approach to accuracy. The reason that these conventions, once refused, are now accepted is not so much the example of Shakespeare’s impatience with that refusal as the introduction of the curtain; an innovation making this radical difference in the conditions of the art of the stage, that between the fall and rise of the curtain the imagination is set free of its bondage to the eyes, and can leap between acts over space and time with as little jolting as between the chapters of a novel. As the intro-

duction of printing has gradually made literature the most widely spread and perhaps the most important of the arts, and has run a line of distinction among them not as yet sufficiently recognized, so in the single art of the stage the introduction of the curtain, by gradually rendering a useful convention acceptable, has widened the scope and freedom of the playwright, which meanwhile has been narrowed by the loss of such conventions as the chorus and the soliloquy.

For as much as no art "holds the mirror up to nature," but does better than that, and does so by the aid of a convention, or set of conventions, upon which its illusion is based; so with the rise of the curtain a mutual good faith is pledged, a sweeping concession is made, whose nature and extent are largely governed by the place and time. It is not the Greek set of conventions or concessions, nor the Elizabethan, nor even the modern Parisian, but those current and acceptable to the imagination in America and at the present time. Trusting to this imaginative contract with illusion, we step out of ourselves into the play. The primary question is whether the play maintains this trust or betrays it, keeps this contract with the imagination or goes after strange gods and alien purposes or breaks down by weakness or miscalculation. If it keeps the faith it is a sound play, though it may be neither interesting nor important; if it betrays it, it is, to the extent of its bad faith, no play at all. The breach may arise from playwright, actor, manager or any source whatever, for the play is a unit and all suffer from the dispelled illusion and the lost faith. Or whether the fault is the play's or the playgoer's, the fault of either is the loss of both; the playgoer has lost his play, and the play has lost a vassal to its authority.

We may well agree with Dr. Johnson that, "It is false that any representation is mistaken for reality," for it is not mistaken, but assumed; we may agree with emphasis that "delusion, if delusion is admitted, has no certain limitation," though with emphasis on the "certain" and substituting *illusion* for "delusion"; but we cannot agree with him that the spectators merely come "to hear lines which relate to some action recited with just gesture and elegant modulation!" Here speaks the author of "*Irene.*" "Lines which relate to some action!" "Just gesture and elegant modulation!" This is not a play! We do not go to hear

lines recited, but to step out of ourselves, imaginatively, into the play. The child who was threatened by a jocose farmer that he would put her through the corn-shucker and "shell her into corn" and explained her lamentations by, "I know he won't, but I'm afraid he will," drew correctly the line which Johnson missed between that belief and this imaginative belief.

Granted, then, that the "drama" and the "play" are of two distinct arts, still may not two birds be killed with one stone? Inasmuch as they have been, it seems that they may. And an umbrella may also serve as a walking-stick, and a walking-stick may also be used to drive off a dog, and a lap-dog may also serve as a burglar-alarm. Nevertheless, it is, in general, the wiser plan, if you wish to make a difficult shot, not to aim at two objects. If, however, you are determined to aim at two objects, it is further observable that a stone has a better chance of glancing up from a cellar door and hitting the house than of glancing off the house and hitting the cellar door; that, indeed, if it succeeds at all in the latter, it is apt to be the exhausted success of a stone that hits the house wall squarely and drops feebly on the cellar door; in fact, that there is a better chance of a fine play off the stage being a readable drama in a book than a fine drama out of a book being an actable play.

Literature is a wide and tolerant art. It is impossible to say what kind of thing is inadmissible to a book. The novel and book drama are catholic enough to welcome the moral symbolism of Hawthorne and the visions of Maeterlinck. But the stage is not so catholic. It will stand something, but it will not stand as much. The eyes see persons on the stage and the imagination is shackled to the eyes. The forms and habits of the drama in literature have been largely adopted from the stage, and such is the plasticity and tolerance of literature that there seems to be little objection to that alien influence. But a play is not plastic, nor tolerant of alien influence. Any breach of its contract, any miscalculation and cutting athwart, any misunderstanding of what it is, this current flowing over the footlights to the audience absorbed and expectant, any break in the electric connection, is paid for on the spot. If the face of the playwright is seen through the surface or web of the play the spell is instantly broken. In the performance of Ibsen's "Master Builder" the contract of the play with me was

broken where the symbolizing, growing more and more inconsistent and oppressive, finally broke through. After that there was to me no play. The hero was an allegorical puppet, and the natural and unique powers and values of the stage were gone. "Ghosts," "Rosmersholm" and "Hedda Gabler," however, seemed to me confident and firm. The playwrights who, in spite of all objections, we nevertheless might as well call of the school of Ibsen, are apt to pile on so much fuel that the draught will not draw, and even Ibsen's sense of stage values was uncertain. The playwrights, as they have been called, of the school of Scribe are apt to have not much fuel to put in and seldom pull much merchandise to market. But they are safer, in the settled and sound tradition of French play-writing, than those who are occupying our attention now in increasing numbers, who have grasped a larger vision of what the stage can do, but lack a stage tradition, and are appallingly cluttered with literary tradition.

The stage play is an engine of extraordinary power. In the sheer humanness of its appeal, in the home-going force of its stroke, it is a mode of expression altogether un-equalled. It owes no tribute of humility to any other art, but it owes to itself the tribute of comprehension of its own conditions and of loyalty to those conditions.

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